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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the public relations problem facing school boards and suggests board action to alleviate these problems. The author emphasizes that one of the most critical instruments of public relations is the board meeting. To improve board meetings as mediums of public relations, the author suggests (1) improving procedures for handling business matters, (2) adopting a more deliberate approach to policy formation, and (3) opening at least one meeting a month to the public as an instrument of public relations. The author also suggests methods for obtaining public involvement in school affairs. (JF)

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TOPIC: WHY YOUR SCHOOL BOARD NEEDS A GOOD PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM

SPEAKER: Ben Brodinsky, Vice Chairman, Board of Education, Old Saybrook, Conn.

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When your schools do a good job for students and the community, you need a public relations program to tell the people about it. You can then generate more support, so you can do even better.

When schools do a poor job, you need a public relations program so you can ask the people what's wrong and how you can do better.

But problems arise because--today--we're not quite sure what to tell, nor how to tell the public, and we don't know what to ask.

There was a time, when life was simpler, and we thought we knew how and what to tell the public. And we didn't bother to ask.

In those simpler days, the schools had, generally speaking, one kind of clientele. That was the old reliable middle-class, largely-white, largely-square and hard-working American. That was the world of Yorba Linda and Whittier, Calif., and of Old Saybrook, Conn., as we knew them a generation ago.

The Schools have been interacting with the people of that kind of world for a long time. They are "the clean people." The establishment. The people with aspirations for their children to go to college or to find white collar jobs.

Suddenly--it seems suddenly--during this generation, the black, the poor, the disadvantaged, the inner city people, the ethnic minorities have begun to make their demands on the schools --and American education is reeling from the shock waves of these demands. The neglected and the scorned people insist they want the same benefits from education that have been showered upon the favored majorities.

We, the school authorities, are not experienced in interacting and working with this group--and we're in trouble as a result of that..

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But the larger truth is that we're in trouble with both groups of people, both our long-established clientele and the relative newcomers.

We're in trouble with the white, square majority because the schools have grown big and impersonal, and encrusted with a bureaucracy of supervisors, directors, and coordinators. No matter how small the community or how small the enrollment, the school system still looks like a huge conglomerate to the parent. It is not easy, in most cases, for the parent to find out who is in charge; who can help; who can answer their questions about their children's progress in school.

We're in trouble with the white square majority because parents are frequently baffled and mystified by what in the world goes on inside the classroom; and by the kind of language teachers, principals and guidance counselors resort to when they speak to the public.

We're in trouble because strange gadgets--from the computer to the cassette--appear to be taking over the schooling of our children, replacing the touch and the smile of a loving classroom teacher. And what happened to the loving teacher? Hundreds of thousands are loyally and lovingly doing their work, but quite a number are ready to leave the classroom to join the picket line or to withhold their services for many—and sometimes good and proper—reasons.

We're in trouble with the white square majority because as new special problems appear--sex revolutions, drug abuses, or the contamination of the earth by fumes from <u>your</u> automobile--the schools seem to say, Yes, we can tackle that problem, just give us the money. But after the money is voted and spent, the problems remain.

Finally, we're in trouble with the white square majority because the school bill grows larger each year and parents don't know exactly why, what they're getting in return, how much of their tax dollar is boondoggled away, and how much is invested in educational programs that will help their children.

The schools are in trouble with the blacks and with the poor, and with some of the ethnic groups, for <u>all</u> of the reasons above--<u>plus</u> others. Among the additional reasons are that the poor and the minorities feel the slings and arrows of discriminatory practices in the public schools. They feel that the traditional middle-class school is determined to stay traditional and dominated by the largely white, largely middle class. They feel their children aren't getting enough attention; that teachers aren't trying hard enough to teach them reading, math or science; and that most staff members under-rate and under-value the talents of their children.

What Is the Remedy for People's Frustrations?

And so it happens to almost every school board (sooner or later): The chairman of the board begins to get an increasing number of complaints about the discipline in one of the high schools. Members of the board begin to get increasing complaints about the science instruction in the junior high school. Editorials in the local newspapers criticize the employment of a school psychiatrist. The town's rabbi passes on a formal complaint because the murder of six million Jews in Germany is nowhere mentioned in the history books. And a parent sends back a report card, not properly signed, but with four-letter words scrawled across the top, which translated ask: "What in the name of Benjamin Bloom and the Coleman Report do these chicken marks on the report card mean?" Then--boom! That sound you just heard was a tax levy shot down.

When this stage is reached, someone on the board or in the administration announces that all this means we have a communications gap, a credibility gap, a breakdown in meaningful dialogue, an erosion of public confidence.

Someone puts it in a nutshell: "We have a public relations problem." Egad, we do indeed, someone else admits, and "we'd better do something about it. The thing to do is to set up a good public relations program--and quick."

And so we come to the central point of our session this afternoon. Why your board needs a good public relations program has practically answered itself, but here's a recap:

Your board needs a good public relations program because you're spending the largest part of the local tax dollar for an activity that needs to be accounted for, explained, interpreted and often justified. You need a good public relations program because whatever it is the school tax dollar pays for is growing costly, complex, complicated, tangled, confusing, baffling, frustrating, and mysterious. I'm covering in this description the curriculum, the school plant, the men and women in the administration, the teachers, and the entire ramification of school services.

For the poor or the racial and ethnic minorities, some of what we teach is often unnecessary or immaterial. And some of what we teach may be highly unnecessary or immaterial for others. But in addition to becoming entangled and complicated, the process of education is tending to become insular, insulated, and isolated--and this is especially true for the disadvantaged minorities.

The things the schools do and teachers do aren't always clear to the parent. "Whatever replicative parameters we may choose to iterate, the achievement of students must be seen both as multilateral and sequential, both causal and viable. Only feedbacks and inputs on an interface basis will result in a synergistic dialogue that may reinforce interactive learning." Most educators don't talk like that, but what they <u>do</u> appears about as clear as that.

And the sad part is that the good things the schools do--and the good things schools do are enormous and incalculable--often go unnoted, unreported, unexplained, uninterpreted, and unpublicized. Therefore unappreciated. Consequently unsupported.

What Type of Public Relations Will Meet Our Needs?

So we need a good public relations program. But what kind? What type? Now, a public relations program may consist of batting out a batch of news releases, double-spaced, and rushing them to the local papers to tell the world that a student from Iran is now attending one of our high schools. Or, it may consist of pressuring the school superintendent to give more talks before the Rotary and the Kiwanis. Or, it may consist of announcing the SAT scores, as a kind of balance to the scores of our athletic contests. Such programs are useful and desirable.

Now, if you want to have a good public relations program, you may have to become a bit more ambitious and (a) hire a public relations officer full time or part time, and (b) set up a line item in the budget marked "public relations" for the development of a PR program. Again, such moves may be useful and desirable. You never know.

You never know whether the appointment of a full-time or a part-time public relations officer, supported by a budget, will be the worst thing you can do. Or one of the better things.

It may be the worst, for a number of reasons. The appointment of such a functionary gives everyone in the school system a good, easy feeling. It relieves principals, teachers and others of the responsibility of worrying about public relations. School board members and the superintendent breathe easier--now there's someone "responsible" for public relations. But isn't this an attempt to pin down and centralize a function that probably cannot be pinned down and centralized?

If the person chosen for the assignment is a media man, he may have superfaith in the power of the press, or in the power of pictures as against words, or in the power of radio or TV spot announcements. He may go all out with these few techniques.

And then there is the always present danger that the public relations program will consist of a bag of techniques or even gimmicks.

But in addition, there is that other danger--that line item in the budget for public relations salary and program may become too visible and too vulnerable with tax-payers or fiscal people. It may become the first item to be knocked out when budgets are cut.

My friends here--the reactors at this table--may indicate why the appointment of a public relations specialist can become one of the better things a school board can do in its efforts to build good will. Certainly, someone has to work out information plans, get facts ready for reporters, write news releases, take photographs, prepare filmstrips, write speeches, prepare newsletters to parents, and draft radio spot announcements.

Doing these things is part of a public relations program--especially if you subscribe to the belief that the main job in this instance is to give out facts, keep the public informed, tell "it like it is" and so on.

Certainly, we would fail in our first public relations responsibility if we don't tell the people how their money is being spent and how much is spent for which purposes. But the people may know and understand how their money is spent--but they may not like any bit of the results.

Again, we would fail in our first public relations responsibility if we didn't keep the people informed of what's going on in the schools or failed to explain the meaning of the activities as we see them. But the people may know and may understand--and not like it, and consequently reject many of the efforts of the schools.

But hold, we've almost forgotten that there is an audience, a sector of the public, that may never get our message at all--not even its most elementary facts. The poor, the black, the disadvantaged, the ethnic groups may well be outside the reach of most of our public relations efforts. The traditional informational techniques--the well-written news releases or the photographs of the happy, smiling, well-dressed child on the way to school--these make little impression on the inner-city mother or father. Let's admit it: We don't know how to communicate with large segments of the public who send their children to school, who demand much from the schools, and who help pay the school bill. And no public relations program is a good program unless it makes new and vigorous efforts to reach these hitherto neglected and ignored taxpayers and to interact with them.

A Spin Off of What We Must Do Anyway

No school system, no board of education, can ever feel content that a planned public relations program, even under the direction of a capable person, or capable persons, will do even part of the job that needs to be done. In fact, many schoolmen have long recognized that good public relations is not something added to the school system but grows out of the school system--its instructional activities, its administrative tactics, its board operations.

For many years, the National School Public Relations Association has published a newsletter called "It Starts in the Classroom." It

is directed to classroom teachers and explores good teaching practices--and good teaching practices, the National School Public Relations Association says, are the foundations of good public relations. Absolutely correct. And just as it--that is, public relations--starts in the classroom, so does it start in the principal's office, in the guidance counselor's office, the superintendent's office, the reception room, or the boardroom. And public relations may very well die aborning in these pivotal spots of a school system.

The public relations formula that comes out of that concept is simple but true: the school system must do a good job first--everywhere--and then tell the world about it. In this context, then, good public relations are a spin off of all the things we must do -- and do anyway -- that is, teach, administer, select textbooks, grade students, send report cards home, make up budgets, select building sites, build classrooms, hire teachers and encourage them to improve on the job.

This suggests then that the school custodian is as important a public relations agent as the audiovisual director, and the teacher is as important as the principal or the board member.

"Every school worker is a public relations worker" is a nice slogan with which to rally the professional and nonprofessional staff on behalf of a good cause. If your school board can succeed with that slogan--more power to you. From every school employee we should certainly expect courtesy toward the public--and that in itself is a powerful public relations technique. We should certainly expect that teachers are bringing compassion to their work. That, too, is a powerful public relations ingredient, and can be carried on without a budget.

The Work of the Board Sets the Tone for Good PR

We may not be able to make every school employee a worker in the vineyard of public relations. But as board members, we can carry the first responsibilities for building good will, for helping people understand our schools, for fostering interaction with every part of the educational and lay community. And such good will, such understanding, and such interaction can be spin offs; can result from the things we must do anyway.

Consider the board of education meeting. Here is where public confidence in our schools can flourish and grow or where it can be destroyed.

I have been a sharp critic of the board meeting as it is presently conducted by many school boards. I have said:

"Most of our actions around the board table are defensive, restrictive, argumentative, punitive, trivial, or controlling

of some minor administrative item. Many of our actions, by force of circumstance, separate and alienate us from our teachers; fail to bring the parents and taxpayers closer to the schools; and do little to help us understand the student."

But the board meeting can be improved. The first step toward improvement is to recognize that the board meeting has been used as the medium for three types of operations:

1. Carrying on legal and required business

2. Considering and formulating policy

3. Interacting with the public

We have tended to jumble and squeeze all three types of operations between 8 p.m. and midnight once or twice a month. The result is frequently chaos and public disgust. The board meeting can become a powerful public relations medium if we treat each of these operations separately and devote enough time and concern for each.

1. We have to sharpen and improve our ways of doing board business--and it can be done.

2. We have to adopt a more deliberative approach toward hammering out questions of policy--and it can be done, but not at 11:30 p.m. after a long evening of fussing over fuel oil and milk bids.

3. Finally, we have to open up our meetings to the public in such a way that the people will feel we're there to listen to them, to answer their questions, and to counsel with them. And this calls for turning at least one meeting a month into a public court of educational relations.

Let's look at each of these goals in turn.

1. Improving the Business Meeting

A carefully constructed agenda, prepared several days before the scheduled meeting, is the key to a good board session. Here are five criteria for an effective agenda for a business meeting:

1. It disposes of routine items first and fast.

2. It takes care of necessary, legally required actions early in the session.

3. It leaves time for the board to receive new information, data, or ideas which cannot be communicated to the board on paper prior to the meeting.

4. It leaves time for the board to make important decisions, other than the enactment of new policy. (Consideration and approval of new and important policy we leave for a specially-scheduled board meeting.)

5. It provides opportunity to select important items for the next meeting.

When board members--and members of the public--arrive for a business meeting, they might logically ask three questions: "What is supposed to take place tonight?" The agenda answers that question. "Is the superintendent ready to offer his recommendations on each of the items coming up?" A series of administrative recommendations, made part of the agenda folder, should answer that question. "What is the thinking behind each recommendation?" A set of documents backing up the recommendations should give board members and the public the facts and ideas to help make decisions.

With such materials before them, board members can work through a long list of business items long before the clock points toward the midnight hour--and leave with the press and the public the impression of an efficient operation.

2. Focusing on Policy

Board of education meetings are constantly making policy in one form or another. Every motion passed, every motion rejected, every action of the board is an index to the aims and purposes of the board, and hence an index to policy.

But there are a host of fundamental questions which each board has to answer if it is to direct the operation of the schools in a responsible way. Does the board support nursery education? Shall the secondary school program be concerned primarily with college-preparatory tasks? Does the board believe in adult education? And what is the board's philosophy regarding class size, use of volunteers, working with other school districts, grouping, report cards, curriculum revision, vocational education? And what about the extended school year, performance contracting, parent and public participation in the governance of the schools?

Thousands of school boards have put their policies into writing and look to the administration to put them into effect. But new questions come up, old policies have to be revised, and new views of faculty, the public and the students have to be taken into account.

A board meeting which yields sound, clear and wise policy can do a great deal to build public confidence in the school.

3. Reaching for Public Interaction

The meeting of the board of education could rise to new heights of effectiveness and usefulness, if several times during the school year, the board forgot its routine business and even its policy-

making function, and transformed itself into a public court of educational relations. As described in "The School Board Meeting." (National School Public Relations Association, 1970):

"In such a public court of educational relations, the feeling would not be one of the employer versus employees, of taxpayers versus public spenders, of rule-makers versus those who have to obey the rules. Its mood and temper would be one of explaining, proposing, questioning, groping, exploring, and sympathetic listening.

"To such a public court, teachers would come not as hired hands but as educators, giving their views, asking questions, letting their hair down, and shaking their dreams loose.

"To such a public court, students would come, at first, perhaps with shouts and demands--and later with their opinions, their questions, their needs, and possibly, too, with reasons, proposals and imaginative suggestions."

We, in Old Saybrook, Conn., have carried on such public courts or open forums with considerable success for nearly two years.

We Need Policies to Encourage Public Involvement

A number of times, in these remarks, I have referred to policy-making and to the involvement of the public. Let's tie these notions together. I submit to you that the most effective step we can take for an improved public relations effort is to fashion policies which will encourage the public to become involved in nearly every phase of public education. Our policies should give the administration the green light--go ahead and involve parents, involve citizens, taxpayers, employers, grandparents, business and labor leaders. Our policies should say: Go ahead and encourage the participation of professional people and laboring people, the rich and poor, liberals and conservatives, and representatives of every racial, economic and social group.

Our policies should require the administration to work out rules and regulations so that such public participation in the business of the schools will be orderly and constructive.

Our policies should make clear that we do not want tokenism or rhetoric from the people--we want their advice, their counsel, their views, their feelings, their hopes and their expectations, their demands.

And one way to get these is to insist <u>through our policies</u> that the administration shall involve the parents and the public in connection with specific problems and issues, as for example:

- When we select instructional materials
- When we revise our grading and reporting systems
- When we seek to plan broader programs for handicapped children
- When we seek to reduce racial tension between systems
- When we seek to improve the school lunch program
- When we seek to improve the art, physical education, or foreign language offerings

As board members we should not expect the administration to use a single or standardized method for parent and public involvement. There are no single successful methods. What we should expect is a multitude of different and flexible procedures. In some instances, the administration may recommend formal advisory councils for over-all problems; in other instances, the administration may find it appropriate to set up temporary, short-term committees to guide the educators on some of the specific tasks I listed above. In still other instances, a few telephone calls, or a questionnaire to parents of the third grade or of the 11th grade may do the job.

It is an open secret that some boards and some educators feel most uncomfortable when the subject of parent involvement is broached. Participation of the public can be time-consuming; it can be a bother and even a nuisance in the eyes of some school people. But it is seldom without value; and it is never fruitless. What the people want from their schools they will generally get--regardless of what school board members or professional educators think. And we had better find out what it is the people want and work with them in achieving their goals. This still leaves us plenty of opportunity for professional wisdom and for helping the people to make wise decisions.